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The Validity and Distinctness of the Orthodox Mystical Approach in Philosophy and Theology and Its Opposition to *Esse ipsum subsistens*

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Resumo

No que se segue, discuto o que eu quero dizer com Misticismo Ortodoxo em Filosofia e Teologia, com referências específicas a Pseudo-Dionísio, o Areopagita; São Simeão, o Novo Teólogo e São Nicolau Cabasilas. Depois abordarei o que considero ser a meta da Mística Ortodoxa em Filosofia e Teologia, ou seja, o rapto ecstático e a união com o Deus Uno e Trino por meio da glorificação ou deificação. A minha investigação vai terminar com uma análise acerca da diferença entre a abordagem de Deus Uno e Trino na Mística Ortodoxa da abordagem Católica Romana de Deus percebido como 'Esse de ipsum subsistens' juntamente com as duas formas diferentes de misticismo que estas percepções de Deus implicam.

Palavras-chave: intelectualismo esotérico, Misticismo Ortodoxo, nuvem do não saber, ontologia, proporcionalidade doxástica, sinergia

Abstract

In what follows, I discuss what I mean by Orthodox Mysticism in Philosophy and Theology with specific reference to Ps. Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Symeon the New Theologian and St. Nicholas Cabasilas. I then discuss what I take to be the goal of the Orthodox mystic in Philosophy and Theology, i.e., ecstatic rapture and union with the Triune God through glorification or deification. My investigation will finish with an examination of how the Orthodox mystical approach to the Triune God differs from the Roman-Catholic approach to God perceived as 'Esse ipsum subsistens' and the two different forms of mysticism that these two perceptions of God imply.

Keywords: cloud of non-knowledge, doxastic proportionality, esoteric intellectualism, ontology, Orthodox Mysticism, synergos,

1. Orthodox Mysticism in Philosophy and Theology

If one searches for a dictionary definition about Christian Mysticism, the common idea behind most plausible definitions is that in Christian Mysticism there is some kind of direct and not externally verifiable and observable communication with God. But is this communication mediated through rational and logical principles, a rational method

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of understanding it and according to rules that obey the restrictions of traditional logic? I support in this paper the thesis that Orthodox Christian Mysticism does not and cannot follow the laws of traditional logic (chiefly among them being the law of non-contradiction), nor is (nor can be) the result of deductive reasoning.

But how exactly have we come to recognise Christian Mysticism as a distinct direction or school of thought in the History of Philosophy and Theology? The mystical direction or school of thought or way of life starts from the very early stages in the development of Christian Philosophy and Theology. It is widely accepted that the Christian Church was founded through a mystical filling with the Holy Spirit, with the Apostles forming the first community of Christian mystics.¹ Soon enough the Fathers of the Church realised however, that Christian Mysticism, in the form of both *mystike theologia* (mystical theology) and *praktike filosofia* (practical philosophy) is not (only) a way of seeing reality but also a way of life.² As such, one can see this way of life in the very early Christian communities, who saw in the New Testament (in particular the Gospel according to St John the Evangelist and the Epistles of St. Paul) the kernel of their canon of life and spiritual development. The first five centuries provided the basic formative context for the later development of Christian mysticism and formed the basic context of the Christian mystical tradition.³ In what follows, I will attempt to summarise some key characteristics of this mystical way of life, having as primary impetus the work of the Orthodox Mystics, St. Symeon the New Theologian and St. Nicholas Cabasilas, a hysechast follower of St. Gregory Palamas. Even though I understand that this selection of key readings from the Orthodox mystical corpus is limited and one may wish to cite other more influential writers (most notably St Gregory Palamas), I do perceive it as pivotal for what I intend to do with the comparison to *Esse ipsum subsistens* later on.

But how has this way of life been discussed by contemporary philosophers and theologians? Some have classified the mystical approach within the realm of non-rational and eccentric and “queer” epistemology and thus, have discredited it from being a valid way of thinking about God.

1. FANNING, Steven – *Mystics of the Christian Tradition*, London: Routledge, 2001; MCGINN, Bernard – *The Presence of God. A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 1: The Foundations of Mysticism. Origin to the Fifth Century. New York: Crossroad, 1991.

2. UNDERHILL, Evelyn. “Medieval Mysticism”. In: J. R. Tanner; C. W. Previt -Orton & Z. N. Brooke (Eds.) – *The Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 7, ch. 26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932, pp. 71-91.

3. KING, Ursula – *Christian Mystics*, London / New York: Routledge, 2003.

Others wish to investigate how we can follow the mystical approach in our contemporary epistemology and metaphysics and how this approach helps us in conducting any meaningful discussion about God.

It is not surprising, that mysticism has met with considerable suspicion by contemporary philosophers and theologians and either has been totally disregarded or it has been discussed via the methods of traditional science, i.e., as an aberrant and “queer” phenomenon of sociological or psychological religious behaviour.

It is by no accident, for example, that Jerome Gellman in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, trying to discuss how philosophers use mysticism, writes:

Philosophers have focused on such topics as the classification of mystical experiences, their nature in different religions and mystical traditions, to what extent mystical experiences are conditioned by a mystic's language and culture, and whether mystical experiences furnish evidence for the truth of their contents. Some philosophers have begun to question the emphasis on experience in favor of examining the entire mystical complex (See Jantzen, 1994 and 1995, and section 9 below). Since this article pertains to mysticism and philosophy, it will concentrate chiefly on topics philosophers have discussed concerning mystical experience.

It is important here to note that Gellman focuses on the philosophical importance of the mystical *experience* (which for him in its philosophical, narrow, sense is a unificatory experience⁴); it is also important to note that he decides to discuss the (false for my perspective) dilemma of mystical experience vs. the ‘entire mystical complex’ as rejected by feminist authors (Jantzen), who think that mysticism is permeated with *androcentric* bias. Gellman in another work⁵ explains that even though the *perennial* (i.e., the identification of common mystical experiences across cultures) and the *constructivist* (i.e., the reduction of the mystical experience into a social construct) approaches to mysticism are not very successful, his favoured *naturalistic* interpretation of mystical experience, i.e., that the mystical experience cannot be explained by supernatural means, is more attractive for a contemporary philosopher. However, I have to point out

4. GELLMAN, Jerome – “Mysticism”. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, revised in 2005, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/#1> (accessed 15.11.08).

5. GELLMAN, Jerome – “Mysticism and religious experience”. In: William J. Wainwright (Ed.) – *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 138-167.

that by reducing mysticism into an *experience*, i.e., as something that can be analysed, described and discussed by the rationalistic and quantifiable methods of traditional science is both an evidence of this philosophical and theological 'suspicion' towards mysticism and a reason for Gellman's dilemma: if x is something that has been discussed primarily by *androcentric* science, then of course it can be classified in 'either-or' terms, when compared and contrasted to feministic approaches to religion.

Other contemporary philosophers try to establish the rules and norms of the *language use*, when it attempts to describe mystical experience, only to find that:

This leaves us with a discomfoting worry. If logic is inapplicable to the mystic's discourse, does that not come very close to saying that discriminations cannot be made in this field between sense and nonsense, the sound and the unsound? The literal approach must be, for a philosopher, a desperate measure, a last resort only. To treat it as anything else would be methodologically perverse. Apart from the difficulties of discrimination, where logic is inoperative, the approach demands an unshakable prior conviction that the mystic's paradoxes are to be taken at their face value as reports of veridical insights. Here there is much that can be challenged.⁶

So, one can safely draw the conclusion here that contemporary philosophical approaches to mysticism attempt to reduce the phenomenon into quantifiable and rational (and by "rational" here I basically mean that they follow the laws of traditional logic) forms of describable behaviour or at least to record "a discomfoting worry" that should unsettle the mind of all philosophers who wish to examine the phenomenon of Christian Mysticism. But is this a valid approach to Christian Mysticism? I think not. Primarily because the Christian mystics and more particularly the Orthodox Christian mystics think that such a rational approach to mysticism is impossible (as we will soon see).

But are the contemporary theological discussions about mysticism in a better state?

Some may say they are, if one takes into consideration the views of Ralph Norman, who concludes that:

Mysticism, then, is a fundamental aspect of the Christian tradition. I have shown how it is intimately linked with a number of historic

6. HEPBURN, Ronald W. – "Mysticism: Nature and Assessment of". In: Donald M. Borchert (Ed.) – *Thomson-Gale Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. Thomson Gale Publ., 2006, pp. 453-461.

Christian doctrines, and how a re-appreciation of mysticism can lead to fruitful and creative insights into central Christian doctrines like the Trinity, Incarnation and Ascension that pose a challenge to much modern theologizing. Further, I have shown how the Christian mystical tradition creates a useful locus for theological exploration of the postmodern. If Christian doctrine is to interact with contemporary thought, then this is certainly an area that needs further investigation. Perhaps most importantly, my description of the transformation of the definition of mysticism in recent years reminds modern theology of the usefulness of historical theology. All too often contemporary theology looks back on earlier periods through the lenses of received opinions that can be shown to be faulty. And yet, when the tradition is revisited, one discovers there a basis which informs the most up-to-date thought. Perhaps, after all, the premodern and postmodern are peculiarly alike, and if theology is to find a way through the thought of a Derrida or Deleuze, its best bet is to re-adopt the insights of the Christian mystical tradition.⁷

So it can be claimed, based on Norman's views, that the theological view on mysticism is more close to the Orthodox one, since: a) he thinks that mysticism is a valuable and irreplaceable element in Christian theology, and b) it cannot thus, be reducible to the *experience* of the mystical. But is the majority opinion of the contemporary theologians in agreement with this? A much too hasty embrace of the postmodern theological discourse, which is evident in the above passage, is an indication that its author is in a minority position, trying to appease the spirit of theological postmodernists or at least postmodern sympathizers. Taking into consideration that postmodernists have severely criticized both Christianity and the Christian ecclesiastical tradition, emphasizing and highlighting the significant differences in interpretation and relativizing theological truth, the conclusion mentioned above seems as a bit self-contradictory and more of a compromise at all costs. But, the obvious question seems to be here: why should we compromise truth?

As we saw from our brief excursion in the philosophical and theological literature discussing mysticism, if we try to find mysticism's true value and importance through much of contemporary philosophy and theology, we have a difficult (if not impossible) task in our hands, since, for the majority of the contemporary philosophical and theological discussions, either mysticism is reduced into an experience that can

7. NORMAN, Ralph – "Rediscovery of Mysticism". In: Jones Gareth, Jones (Ed.) – *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, pp. 449-465.

be described by the methods of natural science, or, at best, it has to be accommodated in the conceptual and ideological contexts of contemporary highly debatable viewpoints (such as postmodernity) which create more problems for the appreciation of the value and importance of mysticism, than actually help us to understand it in its own right. Having thus, arrived at a philosophical and theological impasse, we can proceed now to how we can think in positive terms about the Orthodox Christian approach to mysticism. A discussion of the Orthodox Christian Mysticism will allow us to formulate a basis upon which we can discuss Aquinas' conception of the philosophical and theological mystical vision as a vision of *Esse ipsum subsistens* and so try to determine if a form of mysticism based on this vision is comparable to and agreeable with the Orthodox Christian one.

2. Some of the key aspects in Orthodox Mysticism

In order to establish the validity of our approach to Orthodox Christian Mysticism, we will consult some of the key texts representing key episodes in the development of this approach. We will start with the areopagite texts, since they influenced not only the development of the Orthodox mystical approach but also Western Medieval Mysticism in general (both historically and culturally).⁸ As such, it can form the point of departure for a comparative cultural analysis in the development of these two forms of Mysticism (a discussion of why these two are distinct forms of Christian Mysticism and not just subcategories of one will be argued for later on).

8. As it is known even though in the first few centuries after St. Constantine the Great, there was a close cultural connection between East and West in Europe the contact between the Eastern and the Western Byzantine Empire went through significant difficulties in Middle and Late Medieval periods through the destructive activities of many non-Christian barbaric tribes that broke trade routes and cultural exchange (especially of a philosophical and theological significance) for many decades at a time, see more on this in ATHANASOPOULOS, C. – "The influence of Ps. Dionysius the Areopagite on Johannes Scotus Eriugena and St. Gregory Palamas: Goodness as Transcendence of Metaphysics". In: Agnieszka Kijewska (ed.) – *Being or Good? Metamorphoses of Neoplatonism*. Lublin: Catholic University of Lublin Press (KUL), 2004, pp. 319-341; RUNCIMAN, Steven – *Byzantine Civilization*. London: University Paperbacks Methuen; 1933, 1961; LEMERLE, Paul – *A History of Byzantium*, Tr. [from French] by Anthony Matthew. New York: Walker, 1960, 1964; NICOL, Donald – *Byzantium: Its Ecclesiastical History and Relations with the Western World*. London: Variorum Reprints, 1972; LAIOU, Angeliki E. & MAGUIRE, Henry – *Byzantium. A World Civilization*. Dumbarton Oaks, 1995.

A. The Areopagitic Texts

Some of the first important texts to consult for an Orthodox understanding of Mysticism are those attributed to the famous early mystical Father of the Church, the Athenean St. Dionysius the Areopagite, the famous student of St. Paul the Apostle. I shall not enlarge on the issue of whether these texts belong to St. Dionysius the Areopagite, or to another much later (anonymous to us) author. I shall only mention that according to standard commentaries, the texts have some anachronisms and refer to historical events much later than the life of St. Dionysius; suffice it to say however, that they are in spirit very close to St. Paul's teaching about the Christian dogma (and this argument has been advanced by commentators like John of Skythopolis and St. Maximus the Confessor, who were more close in time to the time of the first circulation of the texts) and thus, I shall, on the basis of this evidence, refer to them as St. Dionysius the Areopagite's texts (1987).⁹

Now, a few things need to be stressed in relation to these texts.

Firstly, they discuss a peculiar form of epistemology, which does not obey traditional laws of reasoning and logic.

It is important to highlight that one of Dionysius' great contributions to mystical Theology, as we know it today, is his theory about *γνόφος* *αγνωσία*: *γνόφος* or *gnofos* has been translated as 'the divine gloom [or 'cloud' or 'mist']; *αγνωσία* or *agnosia* can be best translated as 'non-knowledge'. I should emphasize that this Agnosia is not ignorance (as some have translated the term). It is a peculiar form of knowing that is *ineffable* and *unknowable* to the non-Mystic; it is often however, *communicable* from one mystic to the other, through their common point of reference: the triune God.

This indicates that we have here a peculiar form of epistemology that is quite alien to traditional philosophical approaches to knowledge and reasoning. I will highlight the key features of this epistemology below:

1. Areopagitic Doxastic Proportionality.

A first key feature in this epistemology is its peculiar *doxastic proportionality*. We can see this idea outlined in the very first chapter of the

9. I agree here with Florovsky in FLOROVSKY, George – *The Byzantine Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers* (The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, Volume 10). Belmont, MA: Notable & Academic / Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987. See also LOUTH, A. – *Denys, the Areopagite*. Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989; O'ROURKE, F. – *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*. Leiden: Brill, 1992.

text *On Divine Names*. In the following passage we see Dionysius claim that his Theology is not based on the persuasiveness of man's wisdom, but that it is proportionally limited by the theologian's superior union of reasoning and intuition:

(On *Divine Names*, Chapter 1, Section 1):

[...] we shall establish the truth of the things spoken concerning God, not in the persuasive words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Holy Spirit inspired power of the Theologians, by aid of which we are brought into contact with things unutterable and unknown, in a manner unutterable and unknown, *in proportion* to the superior union of the reasoning and intuitive faculty and operation within us [...].

(Transl. J. Parker, with editorial interventions from the author of this paper.)¹⁰

2. The role of *agnosia* in the Areopagetic epistemology.

A second key feature is the role of *agnosia* in this new epistemology. It cannot be characterised by nor be understood through reason, mind and essence, since none of these is sufficient (in isolation or in combination) to comprehend God's existence. In Areopagetic terms:

(On *Divine Names*, Chapter 1, Section 1):

[...] For Agnosia, [non-knowledge] of its superessentiality is above reason and mind and essence— if must we apply ourselves to the superessential science, so far aspiring to the Highest, as the ray of the supremely Divine imparts itself, whilst we restrain ourselves in our approach to the higher glories by *prudence* and *piety* as regards things Divine [...]. For, if we must place any confidence in the All Wise and most trustworthy Theology, things Divine are *revealed and contemplated in proportion to the capacity of each of the minds*, since the supremely Divine Goodness distributes Divinely its immeasurableness (as that which cannot be contained) with a *justice* which preserves those whose capacity is limited [...]. For, as things intelligible cannot be comprehended and contemplated by things of sense, and things uncompounded and unformed by things compounded and formed; and the intangible and unshaped formlessness of things without body, by those formed according to the shapes of bodies; in accordance with the self-same analogy of the truth, the superessential limitlessness is placed

10. DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE – *Works*, transl. by John Parker. London: James Parker and Co. Publ., 1897.

above things essential, and the Unity above mind above the Minds; and the One above conception is *inconceivable to all conceptions*; and the Good above word is *unutterable by word* [...].

(Transl. J. Parker, with editorial interventions from the author of this paper.)

3. New language means new metaphysics and new ethics.

A third key feature of this new epistemology is that it is expressed in new linguistic forms and it is in these and through these new linguistic forms that it is embedded within the new metaphysics, ontology, ethics that the areopagetic texts outline; the use of specific divine names (such as 'Light' or 'Good') is symbolic of the unknowable by humans realm of the Triune God: man can know *only what is revealed to him via God's grace and only while in ecstatic love with Him*. We see this feature outlined in the passages below:

(On *Divine Names*, Chapter 4, Section 5):

Let us now then celebrate the spiritual Name of Light, under Which we contemplate the Good, and declare that He, the Good, is called spiritual [33] Light, on the ground that He fills every supercelestial mind with spiritual light, and expels all ignorance and error from all souls in which they may be, and imparts to them all sacred light, and *cleanses their mental vision from the mist which envelops them*, from ignorance, and stirs up and unfolds those enclosed by the great *weight of darkness*, and imparts, at first, a [39] measured radiance; then, whilst they taste, as it were, the light, and desire it more, more fully gives Itself, and more abundantly enlightens them, because "they have loved much," and ever elevates them to things in advance, as befits the *analogy of each for aspiration*.

(On *Divine Names*, Chapter 4, Section 13):

But *Divine Love is ecstatic, not permitting (any) to be lovers of themselves, but of those beloved*. They shew this too, the superior by becoming mindful of the inferior; and the equals by their mutual coherence; and the inferior, by a more divine respect towards things superior. Wherefore also, Paul the Great, when possessed by the Divine Love, and participating in its ecstatic power, says with inspired lips, "I live no longer, but Christ lives in me." As a true lover, and beside himself, as he says, to Almighty God, and not living the life of himself, but the life of the Beloved, as a life excessively esteemed. One might make bold to say even this, on behalf of truth, that the very Author of all things, by

the beautiful and good love of everything, through an overflow of His loving [49] goodness, becomes out of Himself, by His providences for all existing things, and is, as it were, caused by goodness and affection and love, and is led down from the Eminence above all, and surpassing all, to being in all, as befits an ecstatic superessential power centered in Himself. [...] And, in short, the lovable is of the Beautiful and Good, and Love pre-existed both in the Beautiful and Good, and on account of the Beautiful and Good, is and takes Being.

(Transl. J. Parker, with editorial interventions from the author of this paper.)

4. The Simple and Unifying Character of the New Epistemology of Light.

A fourth key feature is its unifying character. Trying to circumvent the specific problems in Hellenistic philosophy in terms of human will and agency, and more specifically how knowing and willing good can be one and the same while in ecstatic love, Dionysius emphasizes the unifying force of the mystical illumination. We can see this in the following text:

(On *Divine Names*, Chapter 4, Section 6):

The Good then above every light is called *Divine Light*, as fontal ray, and stream of light welling over, shining upon every mind, above, around [34], and in the world, from its fullness, and renewing their whole mental powers, and embracing them all by its over-shadowing; and being above all by its exaltation; and in one word, by *embracing* and having previously and pre-eminently the whole sovereignty of the light-dispensing faculty, as being *source of light and above all light*, and by *comprehending in itself all things intellectual, and all things rational, and making them one altogether*. For as ignorance puts asunder those who have gone astray, so the presence of the divine light is collective and unifying of those being enlightened, both perfecting and further turning them towards the true Being, by turning them from the many notions and collecting the various views, or, to speak more correctly, fancies, into one true, pure and uniform knowledge, and by filling them with light, one and unifying.

(Transl. J. Parker, with editorial interventions from the author of this paper.)

B. St. Symeon the New Theologian

The mystical tradition that was created in the East, as a direct influence of the areopagetic texts found its most profound Eastern Orthodox defender in St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), a

mystical theologian of such an influence on the Orthodox Church that he is proclaimed as 'the New Theologian', indicating that his work is of comparable validity to the work of St. John the Apostle and Evangelist and St. Gregory Nazienzen. St. Symeon not only consolidated and further elucidated the areopagetic corpus and school of thought and theology, but he enriched it with poems and treatises of great value and importance especially for the development of the Hesychastic Movement in the 13th and 14th centuries (within the context of which Nicholaos Cabasilas, the third key Orthodox mystical author that we will discuss here matured and wrote his treatises). Key ideas expressed through the texts of St. Symeon are the following:

1. Humans (even though created) can see and unite with the triune God during this life and this union is short lived while in the body.

The mystical experience is not only of the soul but encompasses the whole person (both mind and body). More specifically, for St. Symeon, through the mystical union of man and God, man gains via divine grace something from the characteristic unity of the triune God, becoming, in essence, a threefold hypostasis, fulfilling thus the 'κατ' εικόνα' or 'according to Thy image' (τρισυπόστατος: νους or nous, ψυχή or soul, λόγος or logos, reason): man becomes one with God (θέσει) with his body, his soul, and the Holy Spirit of Whom he partakes.¹¹ It is the *heart* (and not the intellect nor the mind) that is elevated as the organ that we have to be primarily concerned with and it is through it and with it that the mystical experience can be achieved in this life (indicating a firm belief in the *psychosomatic mystical experience and transformation*). Also, *absolute freedom* for both God and man is confirmed: man can only attract the mystical vision through the purification and strengthening of the heart and the senses and he can only achieve it, if and when God wills it. It is not only dependent on the continuous struggle of man but also on the will of the Triune God.

The following two texts show these ideas in detail.

In the first, the union with the Triune God and its mode of attainment is outlined in a mystical poem:

St. Symeon's mystical poem: "What is this awesome mystery"

What is this awesome mystery
that is taking place within me?

11. See *Cat.* 15, 72-77; *Hymn* 44 (324), and KRIVOCHINE, Basil – *In the light of Christ*, transl. by A. P. Gythiel. St. Vladimir's Seminar Press, 1986, p. 289.

I can find no words to express it;
 my poor hand is unable to capture it
 in describing the praise and glory that belong
 to the One who is above all praise,
 and who transcends every word...
 My mind sees what has happened,
 but it cannot explain it.
 It can see, and wishes to explain,
 but can find no word that will suffice;
 for what it sees is invisible and entirely formless,
 simple, completely uncompounded,
 unbounded in its awesome greatness.
 What I have seen is the totality recapitulated as one,
 received not in essence but by participation.
 Just as if you lit a flame from a flame,
 it is the whole flame you receive.

(Transl. by John Anthony McGuckin, with editorial interventions from the author of this paper.)

In the following text, the importance on the use of heart in prayer is further highlighted:

St. Symeon the New Theologian: The Three Ways of Attention and Prayer

[The third way of attention and prayer.]

The third way of attention and prayer is then this: the mind should guard the heart in the time of prayer and always stay inside it. From there, from the depths of the heart, it should then lift up the prayers to God. For once it tries inside the heart and tastes and is soothed – because the Lord is Good – then the mind will never want to leave the place of the heart. It will there repeat the words of Peter the Apostle: “It is wonderful for us to be here!” [Mt 17:4, Mk 9:5, Lk 9:33] Then it will always wish to look *inside the heart*, remaining there and pushing aside and expelling all the concepts which are planted by the Devil. To those who have not realised this work of salvation and remain unaware of it, this will most of the times seem very hard and unpleasant. But those who have tasted its sweetness and enjoyed the pleasure inside the depths of their hearts, they all cry together with Paul: “What could ever come between us and the love of God?” [Rm 8:38-39] [...]

[QUESTION. Why is it not possible to achieve all this through the first and the second way?]

As we have repeatedly said, the first and the second way do not bring any spiritual advancement. When we want to build a house, we do not make

the roof first and then lay the foundation, because this is impossible. But we firstly lay the foundation, then build the house and then add the roof. We should do the same in spiritual matters: first lay the foundation, which is to guard the heart and cast out its weaknesses; then build the spiritual house, which is to cast out the evil spirits fighting us through our senses; finally, having overcome the war as soon as possible, add the roof, which is to depart from all things earthly, and give ourselves completely to God. Thus we complete our spiritual house in Christ our God, to Whom all glory is due, unto the ages of ages. Amen.'

(Transl. by Demetrios S. Skagias, with editorial interventions from the author of this paper.)

From the above discussion of Orthodox Mysticism it is evident that there are five main features in Orthodox Mysticism which make it a **distinct mystical approach**:

- a) It cannot be described in terms of subjectivism vs. objectivism (both in terms of epistemology and of ethics).
- b) The mystical experience is veridical (i.e., we can say when we have it), satisfying in this way partly the demand made by some contemporary philosophers (e.g., see Hepburn above), but it does not obey the laws of traditional logic and reasoning (there is a new epistemology involved).
- c) Body and soul are not divided, but they are unified in the mystical union of God and man.
- d) There is no intellectualism nor a conceptualism of any kind, because all reasoning, imagination and memory of sensory images is to be avoided; the organ of chief importance for the mystic is the heart and not the mind. It is important to note in relation to this feature, that Orthodox mysticism is not some kind of sensualism nor an emotionalism, since emotions and senses of the body are also to be avoided in the attempt to unite with the triune God.
- e) The mystical union can be achieved while alive and with the body; later hesychastic mystics, such as St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) and St. Nicholas Cabasilas (1319/23-c.1391) emphasize that this union is achieved via the divine energies and not through a contemplation of nor a participation in the divine essence. The Ninth Ecumenical Synod (1341-1351) made this new mystical idea part of the Orthodox dogma and made prevalent the mystical tendencies in the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church

celebrates this every year during the fasting period before Easter: on the Sunday after the Sunday of Orthodoxy (during which we celebrate the canonical re-institution of the ecclesiastical use of the icons) it is part of the Typikon (the ecclesiastical order of the daily services) that the Decisions of the Synod are read in the Church, so that the Orthodox believers remember that this is part of the Orthodox Christian dogma.

This leads us back to the Orthodox mystical way of seeing our role in the universe and our goal in life. As we indicated above, this mysticism provides a new epistemology and ethics, which is significantly different from the contemporary philosophical and religious alternatives, both in terms of its less anthropocentric aims and its more *soteriological* perspective on creation and on the role of creation in the achievement of the mystical union between God and man. We will attempt to explain this new soteriological dimension of creation through the work of the hysechast Father of the Orthodox Church (student and follower of St. Gregory Palamas), St. Nicholaos Cabasilas who claims that it is here that man's role in the Divine Eucharist as returning Creation to its rightful place can be most clearly envisaged.

C. St. Nicholaos Cabasilas

According to this great St. Nicholaos Cabasilas, man in the form of the priest, in the process of the Divine Liturgy, and while performing the sacrament of Eucharist, offers to God what is made by God (the priest announces in the Eucharist while offering the Holy Gifts that he offers them as of God's to God: 'τα σα εκ των σων σοι προσφέρουμεν'). Cabasilas stresses that the part of Creation that is offered in the altar is not man's but God's. By offering to God what is God's, man enters into a mystical union with the triune God and becomes united with Him through grace, placing Creation in the proper *soteriological* perspective. By re-consecrating nature and creation within the process of the Divine Eucharist, man finds his true role in Creation, becomes light himself and mystically unites with God, radiating light back into creation. Man does not exist to use nature and creatures but to consecrate them and refer them back to their rightful Owner and Creator. And man, according to Cabasilas, can only do this once he starts living through the mystic life of the consecrating Church and its Mysteries. It is only through the mystical realization of man's failure to be a true son and creation of God that man can realize and achieve the mystical union

with God.¹² Through the Mysteries of the Church and most importantly the Divine Eucharist, where bread and wine are offered and become the Blood and Body of Christ, man becomes holy again and, with the return to his holiness, he can further sanctify nature and offer it to God. Cabasilas here is in full agreement with the Orthodox Mystics before him, in claiming that the 'naming' of Creation by man during Creation (in the book of *Genesis*) is part of this re-sanctification of Nature (there is a direct connection with the areopagetic texts here; I will discuss this below). Man was created to sanctify Nature and not destroy it according to the Orthodox Mystics. It is important to emphasise that what is offered in the Eucharist is not owned by man. Through the *epiclesis* man recognises that the actual work of sanctification is done by the Holy Spirit and not through any human powers.¹³ Man is utterly naked, defenceless, with no justification and without pretense, when facing his Creator. The mystery of the all powerful grace and mercy, thus, becomes the true *soteriological* and *sanctifying* force. Man performs a *reasonable* sacrifice of his will over things and himself to gain the object of his ecstatic love, without losing his personal and hypostatic characteristics, so that he can find what he ecstatically loves and desires. Trying to explain the words 'reasonable sacrifice' in the Divine Leitourgy, Cabasilas claims that the sacrifice is *reasonable* because it is *mystical*: the priest, by pronouncing the appropriate words does all that is necessary to make the offered part of Creation holy again and suitable for sacrifice to God, bringing man back into his true role in Creation, in accordance with the *Genesis* book in Old Testament. According to Cabasilas, 'the *sacrifice* is truly *an act* and *a reality*' and even though the priest only says specific names and words, these become significant and mean far more than perceived by human ears, through the mystery of Divine Grace, in the same way that in the *Genesis*, man by naming nature he is not just saying names and words empty of mystical and theological significance. It is important to emphasise that this *use of names and words* lies within the mystical tradition of the Areopagetic texts (see the above discussed areopagetic texts). It is through the names of God that we can gain a mystical awareness of His *apophatic* and *cataphatic* realization and, thus, be led into a mystical union with Him. In the same way, it is through the *naming* process and, via this process, the re-sanctification of Nature, that we can achieve the mystical union of God with creation. Man thus, becomes *synergos* (i.e., collaborator) in salvation with God,

12. CABASILAS, Nicholaos – *A Commentary on the Divine Leitourgy*, transl. by J. M. Hussey and P. A. McNulty. SPCK, 1960, pp. 116-8.

13. I sincerely thank the anonymous referee for highlighting this fact.

gaining himself a new *soteriological* perspective. Cabasilas in a text, where he explains the difference between the new and the old Adam (man after and before the Fall) put forward the following ideas: the true bread (*ο αληθώς άρτος*) is Jesus Christ, who, in the same way that the usual bread strengthens man's heart and gives him physical strength, came down to us and brought us a new form of life and strength. It is Him (Jesus) that we should strive to incorporate within us constantly, to be preserved in the constant and continuous time of hunger (*λιμόν*) that we live during our current lives.¹⁴ This comes in striking similarity with the areopagetic text entitled *Epistle to Titus* and what is claimed there about the symbolic and mystical meaning of food, solid and liquid:

Epistle to Titus, Hierarch (Section IV): But what is the solid food and what the liquid? For the Good Wisdom is celebrated as at once bestowing and providing these. I suppose then, that the solid food is suggestive of the intellectual and abiding perfection and sameness, within which, things Divine are participated as a stable, and strong, and unifying, and indivisible knowledge, by those contemplating organs of sense, by which the most Divine Paul, after partaking of wisdom, imparts his really solid nourishment; but that the liquid is suggestive of the stream, at once flowing through and to all; eager to advance, and further conducting those who are properly nourished as to goodness, through things variegated and many and divided, to the simple and invariable knowledge of God. Wherefore the divine and spiritually perceived Oracles are likened to dew, and water, and to milk, and wine, and honey; on account of their life-producing power, as in water; and growth-giving, as in milk; and reviving, as in wine; and both purifying and preserving, as in honey. For these things, the Divine Wisdom gives to those approaching it, and furnishes and fills to overflowing, a stream of ungrudging and unfailing good cheer. This, then, is the veritable good cheer; and, on this account, it is celebrated, as at once life-giving and nourishing and perfecting.

**D. Comparison of the above mystical approach
with Aquinas' philosophical and theological position
Esse ipsum subsistens**

From the above discussion we saw the basic characteristics of the Orthodox mystical approach. Some may see here a similarity to other theological and philosophical approaches that were put forward in the

14. *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 150, pp. 680-684.

Medieval period and some may even claim that it is very close to the approach put forward by St. Augustine and most clearly expressed in the later medieval period by Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274). To support this, one may even indicate Aquinas' tendency to follow the Augustinian synthesis of *Exodus* 3.14 and the Neoplatonist mystical position of Plotinus (ca. 204/5–270) about God itself being its *ousia* and *energeia*, its will and its cause, primarily and *υπερόντως* self-identical.¹⁵ Indeed it seems that Aquinas elevation of man's intellectual powers (following here Augustine's relevant positions) in all of creation seems very close to the elevated status of man in the mystical approach of St. Nicholas Cabasilas. But is this the case? To prove that the Orthodox mystical approach outlined above is distinct from analogous Medieval approaches (and most characteristically Thomas Aquinas' one), I will briefly discuss the issue of whether the above (Orthodox mystical) approach is compatible to Aquinas' position that God is *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* (*Summa Theologiae*, 1, q.4. a.2).

What would it mean for the Orthodox mystical approach that the Triune God is Subsistent Being Itself? Let us see further into the mysticism that Aquinas' approach entails. According to Etienne Gilson (following here a thread in Aquinas system of philosophical theology) for a man to unite with such a Subsistent Being he needs to be both a theologian and a philosopher.¹⁶ He needs to comprehend that "God is not composed of matter and form. Therefore in Him there cannot be any distinction between essence on the one hand and substance and nature on the other..." [...] "[W]e must, with Aquinas, go beyond the identification of God's substance with His essence and affirm the identity of His essence with His act of existing".¹⁷ Putting the issue more simply, this God is an *Absolute*, Infinite Being (*Ens*) enjoying the infinite fullness of His Act of Existing (*Esse*), i.e., Who has all the potentialities as regards His Essence infinitely realized, perfectly fulfilled or actuated, to the extent that His *Esse* is necessarily one with His *Essence*, and vice versa. In this way, Creation and Salvation is nothing else but God's self-communicating or sharing with created beings (*entia*) the infinite fullness of His *Esse*. Now, the important questions that may be asked at this point are: why does God desire to share Its very *Esse* or *Essence* with all created beings, and how. And the relevant questions

15. DE VOGEL, C. J. – *Rethinking Plato & Platonism*. Brill, 1986, p.88.

16. GILSON, Étienne – *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (tr. A. H. C. Downes). Gifford Lectures, 1931-1932, New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1940, pp.1-19.

17. GILSON, Étienne – *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (tr. Laurence K. Shook & Armand A. Maurer). Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002, pp.89-93.

for man also exist: why does man desire to partake God's perfection and how. According to Gilson the best way to understand Aquinas' thought here is to maintain that "If God is Being, He is not only total being: *totum esse*. He is more especially true being: *verum esse*, and that means that everything else is only partial being, hardly deserves the name of being at all".¹⁸ So, basically God provides fullness and true being to all of creation as a gift of participation in God's perfections and man wishes to partake of this fullness and truth in being, because he realises that he is lacking in both being and truth. In this way, the whole process is ontological and God and man communicate at the ontological level through a realisation process that is dependent on their will only in so far as they are willing to recognise it as being the case. Furthermore, this partaking is inescapable: "esse is what is innermost in all things... Hence, it must be that God is in all things and intimately" (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 8, a. 1, c.). The goal of man thus, becomes to understand through divine illumination and grace this ontology and thus, be open to God's communication to him, existent in him, about His perfection. Aquinas here follows the intellectualist approach of St. Augustine's position of *Illuminatio Dei*: "the intellectual mind is so formed in its nature as to see those things, which by the disposition of the Creator are subjoined to things intelligible in a natural order, by a sort of incorporeal light of an unique kind" (transl. Arthur West Haddan, *De Trinitate*, Book 12, chap. 15, sec. 24). But note that through this intellectualism man attains a vision of God and knows God. Through this esoteric intellectualism God forces upon creation Himself through His ontological (i.e., of true being) partaking process, allowing some commentators to claim that Thomas Aquinas is primarily and chiefly a mystical theologian and philosopher.¹⁹ But is this mystical approach compatible with the Orthodox mystical approach?

Again, one may see here common threads that go as far back as the areopagetic texts,²⁰ and whether one agrees with Gilson about the Metaphysics of the Exodus as being the ultimate source of *Esse ipsum subsistens* or whether Aquinas ultimately is indebted to Parmenides for this,²¹ the issue still remains that we have a radically different conception of God and man in the mystical Orthodox approach that I outlined above.

18. GILSON – *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, cit., p. 64.

19. M NABB OP, Vincent – "The Mysticism of St. Thomas Aquinas". In: *St. Thomas Aquinas*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1925, pp. 89-109.

20. KREMER, Klaus – *Die Neuplatonische Seinsphilosophie und Ihre Wirkung auf Thomas von Aquin*, Leiden: Brill, 1966. O'ROURKE, F. – *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*. Leiden: Brill, 1992.

21. DE VOGEL – *Rethinking Plato & Platonism*, cit.

Firstly, the Triune God of the Orthodox Mystics like St. Symeon the New Theologian and St. Nicholas Cabasilas is not and cannot be an ontological God in the sense conceived by Thomas Aquinas. The Orthodox mystical God has to be a personal God, a God of three persons that are always moving, acting and creating and always and absolutely free.²²

Also, the mystical rapture of the Orthodox Mystics is not an ontological process: by this I mean that it is not bound by the nomological restraints of ontology and reason. It is above reason and incomprehensible. The basic mystical position of the cloud of non-knowledge (γνῶφος ἀγνώσις) is dominant here (in Orthodox Mysticism).

One can also see that another major difference is the intellectualism that is the result of Aquinas' position (Augustine's position of *illuminatio dei*), where the intellect is the primary organ in the union with God. In opposition, as we saw, the Orthodox mystics emphasised the role of the heart and its non-intellectualistic role in the mystical rapture.

Aquinas position has some rather inescapable consequences not only for his Theology but also his Anthropology, and these add more distance between his system and the Orthodox mystical approach.

As we saw in the Orthodox mystical approach both God and man act as absolutely free in this mystical union and furthermore man is becoming a *synergos* with God in the sanctification or glorification of creation. Man's role is an active and voluntary role, a role that man must take upon himself actively and self-sacrificially if he is to become a *synergos* with the Triune God. The example of Jesus Christ here is of paramount importance. As Christ voluntarily accepted His self-sacrifice so does man must voluntarily and with absolute freedom must offer creation back to God through the invocation (*epiclesis*) of the Holy Spirit. This is not a process of self-exploration: it is a process of *kenosis* with and in mystical love (as we saw above in St. Symeon the New Theologian's texts). Man must empty himself from all that is sinful in his personality and attain the unique glorification that he will achieve through his mystical self-sacrificial love and the divine grace and energy coming from God. Essence here is not and cannot be something that can guide man; man can find his way to God only through divine energies acting in and through the divine mysteries.

22. Following here closely the Areopagetic ideas of continuous movement of God and celestial powers in *Celestial Hierarchy*, see PAPADOPOULOS, Stylianos G. – *Kallistou Angelikoudē kata Thōma Akinatou*. Athēnai, 1970, p. 191.

Conclusions

From our brief excursion into Orthodox Mysticism, as found primarily in the mystical theology and philosophy of the Areopagetic texts, St. Symeon the New Theologian, and St. Nicholaos Cabasilas, we can see that the Orthodox mystical approach is a distinct mystical approach in Philosophy and Theology worthy of further study. In this approach, creation becomes autonomous and has a separate existence from God, only when it is lacking in ecstatic love, the true criterion of the mystical way. Creation and man, in this world, void of ecstatic love, thus, become both alienated and alienating. The mystical transformation of the human will has as an ultimate goal not only the transformation of the human body and mind but also of all creation, so that both man and creation as a whole can unite and reside in God's will.

Now, can the result of our investigation into Orthodox Mysticism be compatible with the philosophical and theological views on mysticism, with which we started our investigation? Well, partly yes. Firstly, we did identify that in Orthodox Mysticism we can be veridical about our mystical union and this is one of its key features. Secondly, we saw that another key feature of Orthodox mysticism is its unificatory aspect and its simplicity. Within the mystical union the mystic does not lose his personhood, however his will and intellect do unite with God's. In this way both simplicity and unity are maintained and achieved. These two features make this distinct mystical approach interesting to other mystical approaches in Philosophy and Theology.

Also, can this mystical approach be compatible with the other Christian mystical approaches? We saw that at least in the case of Aquinas' position of *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* and the mysticism that this position allows there are significant differences that indicate an incompatibility. But again the Orthodox mystical approach may stir the imagination and intuition for further developments in other Christian mystical approaches and thus, may prove to be interesting and worthy of further study in these other Christian approaches to say the least.

As a final note, we need to emphasise that in the light of the new ontology, epistemology and ethics that is put forward in Orthodox Mysticism, traditional philosophical and theological categories need to be revised (even the very term "Ontology" must be redefined) and transformed in order to accurately describe what is achieved in and through the Orthodox mystical union.